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Triangular Structures in Knut Hamsun's *Pan*

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The reader of Knut Hamsun's short novel *Pan* (1894) is likely to be struck by the fact that the story contains a rather large number of triangular structures, or love triangles, in which the book's protagonist and first-person narrator, Thomas Glahn, does battle with other men for the possession or control of several woman figures.[1] Glahn uses the goatherd Henriette's memory of two encounters with her lover as a tool in his seduction of her, thereby also demonstrating his need to feel that he is taking her away from someone else,[2] he engages in a struggle with the local doctor in order to control Edvarda, the female protagonist of the story, and after the arrival on the scene of another suitor, an unnamed Finnish baron, he also finds it necessary to oppose this man. Furthermore, Glahn fights with Herr Mack, the most powerful local, for the control of Eva, who is married to an employee of Herr Mack and who, apparently for some time, has been Mack's mistress. On the level of fantasy, Glahn and an imaginary woman figure named Iselin seduce each other to the great dismay of another dream figure, Diderik, who clearly has a passionate interest in Iselin and perhaps even is her lover. Finally, in the novel's concluding postscript "Glahn's Death," there is a love triangle consisting of Glahn, an Indian native named Maggie, and Glahn's unnamed hunting companion.

The presence of all these love relationships has caused traditional Hamsun criticism to regard *Pan* as a love story, and perhaps the richest and most beautiful love story in Norwegian literature. Some critics have also emphasized the role which is played by nature in *Pan*, while others have been particularly attuned to the power relationships which are depicted in the novel.[3] The purpose of this paper is not to argue against the validity of such interpretations, but to suggest a supplementary and equally valid reading: *Pan*, I will argue, can also be regarded as the embodiment of authorial concerns which stem from the very concept of authorship, in that it serves as a reflection of Hamsun's consciously or unconsciously felt need, as an author, to control the response of his audience to his text. I will suggest that Hamsun's need to decide what meaning the reader will find in *Pan* is so strong that it approaches a fear or an anxiety; taking a cue from Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 19), I am proposing that Hamsun's fear of not being able to control the reader's perception of what is meant by the work, may be termed an anxiety of interpretation. In the following, I will attempt to

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both flesh out the theoretical side of my argument and examine some of the triangular structures in *Pan* in order to establish what significance they may have with regard to Hamsun's concern about authority.

In a discussion of authority, Edward Said states that the various meanings of the word together suggest such ideas as "the power . . . to begin, . . . that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously", and that "the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom" (Said 83). It should therefore be accurate to say that to be an author, as opposed to merely being a writer, can only mean to write for the purpose of affecting the audience in a certain way. Such an effect can, of course, be brought about by pure logic, as in a text of chemistry or economics, but in imaginative literature it is more often a result of the text's rhetoric, through which the author attempts to manipulate the response of the reader.

The author's wish to control the interpretation of his text may also be regarded as a specific manifestation of a general human desire, of which the subject may not even be conscious. As Freud indicates in his paper "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming" (1907/1908), the activities of the imagination arise in response to a perceived lack, and the "motivating wishes . . . are either ambitious wishes, which serve to elevate the subject's personality; or they are erotic ones"; however, the two kinds of desires "are often united" (146-47). In a brief essay entitled "Family Romances" (1908/1909), Freud further states that the daydreams, when carefully examined, "are found to serve as the fulfillment of wishes and as a correction of actual life. They have two principal aims, an erotic and an ambitious one—though an erotic aim is usually concealed behind the latter too" (238). Freud's daydreamer-artist does not distinguish clearly between his desire for power in general and for sexual power in particular, and making this distinction is, in fact, unnecessary to a linking of the daydreamer's ambitious wishes and Said's notion of authority. A writer's claim to authority is simply a manifestation of his desire for power and control, and this desire arises in response to a conscious or unconscious perception of a lack which needs to be filled.

The question presents itself, however, of how the act of writing may allow an author to satisfy his ambitious and erotic wishes, given the fact that he, as author, communicates with only a small portion of humanity, only at a distance, and only in a situation where he is absent and thus without the ability to directly influence events. I would like to suggest that his ambition is satisfied not only as his work brings him

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fame and fortune, but also, and even in the absence of these rewards, as he structures his text in such a manner that he can have a reasonable expectation of being able to control the kind of understanding which the reader gets from his reading experience. This is particularly true of ironic writers, for there is undoubtedly a sense of power which comes to someone who, like Henrik Ibsen's Professor Rubeck in *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), is able to create a striking surface meaning while being alone in his ability to see the radically different meaning which is hidden underneath. A certain sense of almost erotic satisfaction might also be available to those authors who, being Kierkegaardian reflective seducers at heart, engage in manipulation of the reader for its own sake.

Such an author will, as I have already suggested, attempt to satisfy his desire for power over the response of the reader by employing persuasive, i.e. rhetorical means. The various rhetorical elements will, of course, need to be interpreted by the audience, and this makes the literary transaction a tripartite one which involves an author, a text, and a reader. The author cannot disregard the fact that anything he writes will have to be interpreted by his audience, and he has to be prepared for readers who may not choose to adopt a collaborative stance, but who may be in severe conflict with him as they labor to determine what is to count as textual meaning. The process of interpretation, when viewed in this light, also of necessity appears to be rhetorical, for the reader may well choose to compete with the author on his own turf by employing persuasive means to make certain that his particular view of the text prevails. The structure of the literary transaction is thus similar to that of the love triangles in *Pan*, in that the author and the reader are fighting for possession of the third term, the text.

The significance of the interplay between author and reader is sufficiently great that it may serve as an organizing principle for the various theories of reader-response, which may be organized according to the importance that is assigned to the author and the reader, respectively, in the construction of meaning. Reader-response theories may, in fact, be thought of as positioned on a continuum where the one end would belong to the radical intentionalists, who would locate textual meaning solely in authorial intention, and where the other end would be occupied by the equally radical "readerly idealis[ts]" (Mailloux 5). A position close to the middle, between these extremes, has been advocated by Peter Brooks, who in his book *Reading for the Plot* and elsewhere favors a theory of reading which is based on the Freudian concept of transference. "Our exploration of narrative in the situation of its telling and its listening has led to the sketch of a transferential model of the text that seems to me pertinent and even crucial to the description of

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transference. "Our exploration of narrative in the situation of its telling and its listening has led to the sketch of a transferential model of the text that seems to me pertinent and even crucial to the description of narrative as a process of dynamic exchange," he says in the conclusion to his essay "Narrative Transaction and Transference" (Brooks 235-36). Brooks argues for a consideration of "not only what a narrative is, but what it is for, and what its stakes are: why it is told, what aims it may manifest and conceal, what it seeks not only to say but to do" (236). Narration can be motivated by self-interest or by altruism, he says, and a common purpose is seduction, "be it specifically erotic and oriented toward the capture of the other, or more nearly narcissistic, even exhibitionistic" (236).

Brooks' emphasis on the seductive aspect of narration fits in well with the tripartite model of the literary transaction as it is structurally represented by the love triangles in Knut Hamsun's novel *Pan*. The implied author of this text appears to be intent precisely on capturing his other, i.e. the reader; a writer who, being the literary equivalent of Ibsen's Professor Rubeck, revels in creating structures of meaning which only he can see, is little more than a narcissist, and his activity turns exhibitionistic if he, for purposes of self-congratulation or to elicit the admiration of the reader, chooses to provide clues to the relationship between the hidden meaning and that of the surface.

Through my Freudian-rhetorical discussion of the literary transaction, I have pointed out the significance of the structural correlation between the love triangles in *Pan* and the struggle between the author and the reader. It should also be recalled, however, that Freud observed a strong connection between ambitious and erotic aims in the operation of general human desire, and I am suggesting that the connection between the erotic and the ambitious is reflected in *Pan* on two levels. If the critic elects to regard love as a figure for ambition, a thematically based reading of *Pan* may treat it as a story about power in general and artistic power or authority in particular. A close examination of the internal dynamics of the triangular structures, furthermore, reveals that the power struggles between the male antagonists frequently is carried out in sexually symbolic terms; consequently, the connection between eroticism and ambition is reflected on the tropological level of *Pan* as well. This ties in with a point which I have made in a different context, namely that the master trope of *Pan* is actually writing itself, and that the first third of the book contains a metonymic structure in which a close connection is established between the writing process and male sexual activity. Drawing on Sandra Gilbert's essay "Literary Paternity," a major point of which is that the concept of authority implies textual

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ownership in a manner which is similar to a patriarch's control of his posterity, I was able to demonstrate that Hamsun, in *Pan*, comes across as a highly phallocentric writer whose patriarchal ideology is revealed in both the thematics and the tropology of his text (Sjåvik 280-81).

The strength of the author's anxiety of interpretation may be measured by the outrageous means by which his narrator-protagonist attempts to vanquish his opponents. This is brought out most clearly in the relationship between Mack and Glahn, where Glahn emerges with a kind of victory through his sacrifice of Eva's life. After Eva's funeral, Mack appears "hollow-eyed, his face was grey" (Hamsun 127), while Glahn seems to be none the worse off despite his sentimental account of his loss two years later. Translated into the terms of the relationship between author and reader, Eva's death may be taken to mean that the author's control of the meaning of the text is more important to him than the existence of literature itself: If he cannot control the issue of his writing activity, he may see no point in writing at all.

The strength of the author's sense of ownership of the text is also revealed through Glahn's actions involving his two other male opponents in Nordland, the baron and the doctor. Spitting into the baron's ear during the party at Sirilund, Glahn not only commits an awful social blunder but also delivers the ultimate insult. Symbolically, the act constitutes a homosexual assault which, essentially, comprises a denial of the baron's manhood. Sexual dominance is also the essence of Glahn's affront to the doctor, as he holds out his gun in front of him as though he were a dog and whistles and coaxes him to jump over it (67). The sexual-symbolic implications of the gun are rather transparent; less obvious is the fact that the Norwegian word for dog, *hund*, and the Norwegian word for the feminine pronoun she, *hun*, are homophones. Using a phallic symbol, Glahn is therefore, on the level of grammar, attempting to deprive the doctor of his masculine gender, which here clearly can be read as masculinity in general.

What is truly striking about both of these incidents is their rhetorical force, for Glahn's denial of his opponents' manhood may be regarded as a figure for Hamsun's wish to deny the reader any right to textual paternity. Glahn's uncompromising attitude when dealing with his adversaries is clearly a reflection of Hamsun's need to be in control and to be regarded as the only begetter of textual meaning.

It should be evident from the preceding discussion of *Pan* that a reading which is focused on the triangular structures in the text, has the potential for uncovering internal thematic and tropological opera-

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tions which the author might prefer to keep hidden. It may, to some degree, be a failure of the author's rhetoric if a recalcitrant reader refuses to yield to his authority, insists on ferreting out the workings of his mind and his images, and then displays the result to the world. What rescues such an author as Hamsun from the chagrin of seeing his rhetoric exposed, however, is the fact that he has himself sown the seeds of such exposure in the text, and it is only through a reliance on precisely those textual elements that the critic may be able to perform a reading which, at first glance, seems to go against the grain of the author's intention. It is difficult to be certain that a reading such as the present one is entirely anti-intentional, for Hamsun may well have anticipated the possibility that it might someday be offered. Whereas this reading appears to prevent the author from claiming full dominance of his text, it clearly also makes the reader more aware of the author's rhetorical cleverness and sophistication, which an exhibitionistic author such as Hamsun would, of course, find extremely attractive. Hamsun might even regard the critic's awareness of his rhetorical acumen as fair compensation for his loss of control over the reading process, especially since the loss of control might, in fact, be illusory. The author might claim to have actually engineered the whole of the supposed unmasking of his rhetoric, and his sense of control of the interpretation of his text might be stronger than ever. In the end, therefore, the outcome of the battle between the author and the reader is far from certain.

Notes

1. The triangular motif has been briefly mentioned by Willy Dahl (76), who focusses his discussion on Glahn's discovery of the relationship between Mack and Eva, the Iselin fantasy, and Glahn's seduction of Henriette.

2. Dahl emphasizes Glahn's need to not only possess Henriette, but also to feel that he has vanquished her lover (75-76).

3. Some examples of the fine criticism devoted to *Pan* are found in Nettum, Sehmsdorf, and Vige.

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